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Girls challenge media's message

by A. David Dahmer
June 16, 2010

Project Girl at the Catholic Multicultural Center

Children today are consuming more media than ever. Most 8- to 18-year-olds spend about 10 hours a day using some kind of recreational media whether it be television, computers, or video games. Unfortunately, the images they see often reinforce gender stereotypes, emphasize unrealistic body images, or show women in passive roles, or ones that are simplistic or sexual.

That's where Project Girl comes in.

"Kids are being bombarded by a lot of media today," says Project Girl co-founder Kelly Parks Snider. "And many of those stories are very contrary to what is good for our families, our communities, and our democracy... stories that are consumer-based and about selling products. So, they focus on the kids' vulnerabilities. They make the kids feel a little good about themselves, but not great. If we all felt good about ourselves, we wouldn't need any of that stuff."



Emily Keown (left) and Kelly Parks Snider lead

Project Girl

Project Girl is a national initiative that was started right here in Madison. They are running free art workshops for girls ages 10-16 years every Thursday this summer at the Catholic Multicultural Center that give girls the tools to look at media with smarter eyes. Project Girl workshops give girls the opportunity to create art, hang out with other girls, and make new friends.

"Just to see the girls get so excited is amazing for me," says Emily Keown, program coordinator of Madison's Project Girl. "They stand up and do this public speaking and you forget that they are 11 and 12 years old. They write artist's statements. All kids want to learn and they want to have something expected of them. It's when people stop expecting them to do amazing things, that's when they start to move away."

The girls that meet at the Multicultural Center on Thursday nights are mostly Latino girls ages 9-19, but Project Girl is open to everybody. "We kind of go with the flow here as kids go in and out but I know that the Boys and Girls Club [on Taft Street] will be bringing some girls over, too," Parks Snider says. "One of the great things that happens here at Centro Guadalupe is that the language issues are part of the adjustment that we make when we are here. Some of these kids don't speak English, so we'll have nine-year-old speaking Spanish and teaching a 19-year-old about what's going on. That can be very powerful.

"We want girls that want to lead, we want girls that care about the lives of other girls, we want girls that want to learn and make art," Parks Snider adds. "The art that these girls create from these workshops will become part of a public art exhibition here. Hopefully, that art will educate and transform the lives of other girls.

The need for more positive images of girls in the media is clear. A recent survey by Girl Scouts of the USA's (GSUSA) Research Institute, Girls and Body Image, found that 89 percent of girls say the fashion industry places a lot of pressure on teenage girls to be thin. Further, only 46 percent think that the fashion industry does a good job of representing people of all races and ethnicities.

"The girls have grown up in this culture, so we're asking them to do something very difficult: To interrogate a culture that is all they've ever known," Parks Snider says. "This is about us telling them

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what to do, this is about them having an art experience. They learn from each other.”

Project Girl started in 2004 with a series of art-based workshops that became the basis for the traveling multi-medium Project Girl Art Exhibition, and multi-part Project Girl media literacy teaching curriculum. It is the nation's first girl-led mobilization that helps adolescent girls deconstruct their media-based culture. It was founded by Parks Snider who, at that time, had three girls in middle school and did not like what she saw.

“It seemed that their lives had become far more corrupted and polluted than the life that I grew up in,” Parks Snider remembers. “There were many things that I didn't like in the cartoons they were watching the television shows, the advertising geared towards them, and the music lyrics that were very disrespectful,” Parks Snider says. “All of these things that kids were being exposed to at a very young age.”

Parks Snider then consulted nationally with many leading thinkers and authors on adolescent girl development. “What most of them were saying was these changes had occurred because of the media and the amount of saturation and the amount of marketing dollars that are being targeted towards adolescent girls,” she says.

And so Project Girl was founded by Snider, a visual artist, and Jane Bartell, a video producer, and has evolved into a nationally touring visual arts exhibition and series of art-based events, workshops, and multimedia educational materials designed to build girl communities supporting resistance to harmful commercial messages. Girls, educators, parents, youth, and church groups continue to attend and participate in Project Girl workshops and exhibitions nationally.

They have a public art exhibition — The “Project Girl” exhibition — that has made its way throughout the country and is now in La Crosse. This is a traveling, national exhibit aimed to get people thinking about how today's advertising and entertainment impacts females.

“It's not about telling kids what they should do, it's about opening their eyes with an art experience,” Parks Snider says. “We heighten awareness and help kids become more critical consumers and then we expect them to take that information and do something with it so they can impact the lives of others in their community and in their schools. The art that is in that exhibition has a very deliberate story and message and its created to get people to think differently.

“What I like to do is to use art as a way for social change,” Parks Snider adds. “Combining art and activism. Art is used as a mechanism to open people's eyes and getting them to think. Kids do care. Girls want to be part of something and they want to play a role in creating change and be involved in something bigger than just being a passive receiver in this media world. Girls all across the country have shown us that; especially the girls here in Madison.”

The American Psychological Association's (APA) Report on the Sexualization of Girls found that three of the most common mental health problems among girls — eating disorders, depression or depressed mood, and low self-esteem — are linked to the sexualization of girls and women in media.

“The only reason why we are losing this battle as a people and as a community is because we're not paying attention to this,” Parks Snider says. “If we would be paying attention and if people would be looking at things with a more critical eye, they would see that this is appalling.”

The study further pointed out that 80 percent of all girls are dissatisfied with their bodies.

“It's a timely issue,” Parks Snider says. “People are really just starting to get fed up and starting to pay attention. I think we're really talking with the girls about things that nobody ever talks to them about. Girl groups are really important because it gives them a supportive place where they can just be themselves and where they will always be supported and never shot down.

**PROJECT GIRL
SUMMER
PROGRAM**

**Middle School Girls
June 14-July 19;
Mondays,
2:30-4:30 p.m.**

“Project Girl uses art-based workshops and experiences to give girls the tools and information needed to look critically at our contemporary culture and the media's influences. Girls attending the workshops will explore the following topics: Basic media literacy concepts, examining stereotypes and labels, body image, sisterhood, consumerism, and true girl power.”

Place: Edgewood College Campus
Price: \$75 Fee covers all materials (Scholarships are available)
Coordinator/Instructor: Emily L. Keown

Middle School Girls will be creating collages, posters and sculptures. Girls will work together to create art and explore their own views on the media and the role it plays in their lives. A group exhibition is planned so that both groups can share what they learn and create with each other and the community.
Sign up now e-mail ekeown@edgewood.edu or call 284-7487

Keown says that Project Girl is just trying to guide them on a path. “They can wear lipstick, they can wear high heels, they can date boys if they want.... but they need to know all of their options,” she says. “We just want them to have as much information that they can so they can decide for themselves instead of having these influences try to persuade them.

“We really have special seats in this conversation because we get to sit in the room with girls while they are talking to each other,” Keown adds. “There's a trust there and we know what they are scared about when they go to school and we know what the fights are about and we know what subjects in school they think the boys are better at. Then we can go in and ask them, 'Why?' But so many people aren't sitting back and listening and letting them talk first.”

Project Girl takes place Thursdays, 6-8 p.m. at the Multicultural Center. It is free. For more information on Project Girl you can come to an event or call Kelly 576-2847 or email: kpsnider@charter.net or visit www.projectgirl.org

For more information, visit www.projectgirl.org/

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